

Chapter 12. Abhidharma Theory of Perception

Perception means how we perceive things with our senses. We have six senses: *cakku* (eyes), *sata* (ear), *ghana* (nose), *jivha* (tongue), *kāya* (body) five are external/physical, *mano* (mind) is internal/mental. The external world is perceived directly by our senses in spite of the Abhidharma doctrine of the momentariness of all conditioned dharma-s, due to the fact of co-existent causality. In an experience of direct perception (*pratyakṣa*), whether sensory or mental, the perceptual object as the *ālambana-pratyaya* is actually the object out there existing at the very moment of the arising of the corresponding consciousness.

According to Early Buddhism, perception does not take place immediately when the eye comes to connect with an object. Our sense comes to corresponding sense object we do not get full cognition. Full cognition takes series of mental events. Both early Buddhism and Abhidharma do not deny the reality of external world.

At initial stage, there is perception. At later stage, there is concept. Perception paves the way to the idea of concept. The function of concept is interpretation. Our perception does not corresponding to reality. The original perception is interpreted.

In Early Buddhism

We can find early Buddhist version of the theory of perception in the *Madhuprindika sutta* of *Majjhima Nikāya*. There is a very beautiful analysis of this *sutta* by Bhikkhu Nananda, in his book on *Concept and Reality*.

Perception is a series mental state; full perception, full cognition occurs at end of series, that is the basic theory.

According to the *Madhuprindika sutta*, these are 6 stages of the perceptual process: *viññāna*, *phassa*, *vedana*, *saññā*, *vitakka*, *papañca*.

1. *viññāna*: bare awareness (not full knowledge). When the eye comes in contact with the corresponding object, there is eye-consciousness. This eye-consciousness does not bring you full knowledge. In the commentator, it is said *dassana-matta*, it is mere sight; it is very faint idea, indistinct. In other words, it is non-epistemic; it has no epistemological function.
2. *Phassa*: sensory contact. *Phassa* means nothing but union of [combination of] these three things: the sense organ, the sense objects and sense consciousness.
3. *Vedana*: affective function. It can be pleasant, it can be unpleasant, it can be neutral.
4. *Saññā*: perception. You see the things. *Saññā* and *viññāna* both from the same root *ñā*; both are cognitive terms, but *saññā* represent more complex level of knowledge of process. *Saññā* is immediately follow by *vitakka*.
5. *Vitakka* means whatever you perceive you discriminate. There is mental interpretation, whatever you perceive you interpret.
6. *Papañca* is the last stage which represent conceptual proliferation, whatever you perceive becomes a concept.

You interpreted it, then you consider it good or bad, through that you refer to past, and similar past experiences, then you speak of similar future experiences. It is that stage we make a concept, what we perceive (with our eye) we convert it into concept.

At conceptual level you make what is dynamic into static, because sense perception is dynamic, what you perceive is changing all the time.

For the external world what we perceive is not really the real external world, it is the external world plus what we interpret. This is the element of interpretation, suffering come because you make your own judgements, you make your own prejudices. What is the original percept is colored by your own interpretation. This is early Buddhist version of theory of perception.

The early Buddhist theory of perception is beautiful, acceptable, logical, rational, but when we come to the Abhidharma there are a lot of problems because of the theory of moment.

In Abhidharma

Instrument of perception

The question of what actually constitutes the instrument through which we come to acquire knowledge of the external world is one of the important epistemological issues among the Abhidharma schools. As regards to the problem: "What sees?" Given that we are bound to saṃsāra through ignorance (avidyā), how can we overcome the way of cognizing things (viparyāsa) and acquire the liberating insight (prajñā) which sees things truly as they truly are.

A dharma - whether, physical, mental, neither physical nor mental, or even unconditioned - is a unique force, possessing a unique, intrinsic characteristic, that has an impact on the human experience, and it is discovered by a valid means of knowledge (pramāṇa), either direct perception (including spiritual realization) or inference having its ultimate basis on direct experience. The absolute reality of nirvāṇa is establishable even though it is an unconditioned, for an ārya can experience it directly, and it moreover has impact on our thinking and aspiration. The Sarvāstivāda investigation into the absolute real leads to the conclusion that it is the universal principles directly realized by the ārya-s that constitute absolute truth. A metaphysical notion, like the Self (ātman) or the Person (pudgala), is not acceptable for the Sarvāstivāda as an ultimate real precisely because it cannot be cognized by any means of cognition or be experienced through the spiritual insight of the ārya-s.

All ultimate reals (dharma-s) are knowable, cognizable. There can be no exception to this. And these knowables, cognizables, have their objective existence which affects our perception of not only the phenomenal world, but also the domain of the unconditioned. What are the cognizable dharma-s? All dharma-s are cognized through the consciousnesses in accordance with the specific objects such as visual consciousness cognizes the visibles. Auditory consciousness cognizes sounds. Olfactory consciousness cognizes smells. Gustatory consciousness cognizes tastes. Bodily consciousness cognizes tangibles. Mental consciousness cognizes dharma-s; the eye, the visible and visual consciousness; the ear, sounds and auditory consciousness; the nose, smells and olfactory consciousness; the tongue, tastes and gustatory consciousness; the body, tangibles and bodily consciousness. The mind, dharma-s and mental consciousness.

Hence it is said that all dharma-s are cognized through the consciousnesses in accordance with the specific objects in accordance with the (sphere) of activity, with the

object domain (viṣaya), with the cognitive object (ālambana). These are known as the cognizable dharma-s.

When the Abhidhamika-s explain the theory of perception, they explain it by adding two new theories: one is the *bhavanga*, the other is the *theory of moments*.

In the Abhidharma, in any instant of perception there are three things: One is sense organ, one is sense object, one is sense consciousness. These three things must be there in any given instant of perception.

According to early Buddhism, the connection between these three is causality, the causal connection is there, pratītyasamutpāda. But with the development of the theory of momentariness, a question arises.

If everything is momentary, how can you explain the causality of these three things. According to the theory of momentariness, the sense organ, the sense objects, the sense consciousness are momentary.

The sense organ and the sense object are the causes of sense consciousness (perception). The *cakkhu* and *rūpa* are causes of *cakkhuvīññāna*, the eye and what is visible serve as causes for the emerges of eye consciousness. The eye and the visible are causes, the causes must precede the effect; the cause is always antecedent to the effect. Sense-organ and sense-object are causes; sense consciousness is effect. If these three are momentary, then when sense consciousness arises, the sense organ and sense object are not there.

If these three things arise together, there is no causality. You can't explain them either as simultaneous or as occurring in chronological sequence. This is the problem: how to explain the causality of perception.

Now, there are three responses to this problem - The *Vaibhāṣika*, *Sautrāntika*, and *Theravāda*.

Vaibhāṣika

All the three schools accepted the theory of momentariness. Therefore all the schools have to face this same problem. The Vaibhāṣika believe that they can remain as good Buddhists by explaining the causality of the functions of dharma-s in accordance with the Buddha's teaching of conditioned co-arising. But their theory of sarvāstitva logically requires that each function too must not only belong uniquely to a given dharma, it must also persist in time together with the dharma. Unlike the dharma's substance, it can be brought into operation with the help of causes and conditions, but it is not anything new that comes into existence. It is in accordance with such a Vaibhāṣika doctrine that Saṃghabhadra persistently seeks to establish that the seeing by the eye must properly belong to the eye (and hearing of sound must belong to the ear, etc.), even though at the same time its exercise needs the assistance of visual consciousness as a supporting condition.

Sarvāstivādin says: *cakkhu* = *passati* = sees; *Vijñāna* - *vijñāti* = (cognizes). The Sarvāstivādins make distinction between the *passati* [sees] and *vijñāti* [cognizes]. If eye can see things without consciousness then all the five sense organ can function together.

They make a distinction between *passati* and *vijānati* which is the eye that sees, it is *vijñāna* that comprehends. Eye alone can see, if that were case, then all six senses can function together. *Vijñāna* can cognize without the eye, if so, even the blind should be able to see things.

The three things work together: the eye sees, the consciousness comprehends and the object present itself together at one given moment. The three things take place together, therefore, their relationship is defined as one of simultaneous causation (*sahabhū*). In the context of explaining why the five sense faculties are called thus, that is, in each case an “indriya” which is said to denote *ādhipatya*, “supremacy/dominance” - Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* differentiates the *Vaibhāṣika* and the *Sautrāntika* views: According to the *Vaibhāṣika*, the eye is an *indriya* because it exercises dominance in the seeing of visual forms, whereas for the *Sautrāntika*, the dominance is with regard to the apperception of its specific object (*svārthopalabdhī*).

Due to their belief in the theory of momentariness and the theory of *svabhāva*, the *Sarvāstivādins* believe that the mind and mental conditioning forces/mental concomitants (*caitasikas*) necessary arise together at the same time, responding to the same object, through the same organ, in the same mode, each having the same number of members in the particular moment. This is the principal governing the relationship between the mind and mental concomitants. On top of this they also believe that in any mental moment, the mind must arise with at least ten mental concomitants with other mental arising together depending on the conditions. In their *citta-caitas* model, the mind and mental concomitants mutually condition one another. *Citta* is a personal force whereas the *caittas* are external, universal *dharma*-s though inextricably linked to the *caittas* only, and personalized by individual *citta*.

Sautrāntika

The *Sautrāntikas* criticize this theory on the ground that it is absurd to make distinction between *passati* and *vijānati*. According to *Sautrāntika*, there is no difference between the seeing (*passati*) and cognizing (*vijānati*), these are only linguistic habits of language.

According to *Sautrāntika*, the object does not present itself; the eye does not see; the *Vijñāna* does not cognizes. This is because these are momentary things [instantaneous things], they cannot accomplish anything. There is no time for them to accomplish anything, the whole things must be understood as process of causation: *cakkhunā ca paicca rūpa ca uppajjati cakkhuvijñānaṃ* = because of the eye and because of *rūpa* (the visible) there arises visual consciousness. That is the answer.

A process of perception is a causal process, there is no agent (soul entity).

The *Sautrāntikas* say that *cakkhu* and *rūpa* are cause; *Vijñāna* is the effect. So the *cakkhu* and *rūpa* are earlier than the *Vijñāna*.

The *Sautrāntika* came to the conclusion: we can never perceive anything directly. It is called the theory of representative perception. For the *Sautrāntika*, it means that the dominance is with regard to consciousness (*vijñāne tu tayo ādhipatyam*), for the perceiving- as far as one can speak of a “perceiving agent” in a relative sense- is performed by visual consciousness, not by the visual faculty. There is in fact no “seeing of a visual form” or “hearing of a sound” apart from consciousness. There can be

no seeing of form apart from grasping (grahaṇa), and grasping is none other than consciousness. In other words, in-as-much as the eye has dominance in the arising of visual consciousness, one could speak of its “seeing of a visual form”. But this should really mean the “perceiving of a visual form by consciousness”. The Sautrāntikas pave the way for the emergence of Vijñānavāda.

Theravāda

All these problems arise because of the theory of momentariness. The Theravādins are aware of this problem. Based on the Sautrāntikas and Sarvāstivādins, the Theravādin develop their own theory, they agree with the Sautrāntika in most cases, but they refused to accept their theory of representative perception.

According to the Theravādins, a conceptual process consist of ten stages with the following:

- *Atīta bhavanga*: it means past unconsciousness which does not participate in this process. This refer to a moment before a material object comes into contact with sense organ, it just the moment immediately before the object impinges into sense organ.
- *Bhavanga calana*: when external object impinges on our sense organ, the subliminal consciousness gets disturbed.
- *Bhavanga upaccheda*: the subliminal consciousness gets cut off; the surface consciousness takes over.
- *Āvajjana*: the surface consciousness pays attention to the object.
- *Viññāna*: bare sensation, not full cognition.
- *Sampaticchana*: receive the object; receptive consciousness.
- *Santīrana*: mind investigation. Mind investigates the object.
- *Vatthūpana*: mind determination.
- *Javana*: full cognition, full perception takes about 7 moments
- *Tadīrammana*: registration. What you have fully cognition register in the sub-conscious, it goes to the memory for future reference taking 2 moments.

According to Theravāda Abhidhamma, this whole process of perception takes 17 thought moments. For the first 8 stages, each stage assigns one moment. *Javana* (full cognition), takes 7 moments and the last one *Tadīrammana* (registration) takes 2 moments.

If everything is momentary, what impinges on my eye is no more time perception, in order to explain this, the Theravādin have very ingenious explanation that the duration of matter is longer than the duration of the mind, the raise is 1 to 17, that means to say when one moment of matter arises and perishes during that period 17 moments of thought arise and perish. In that case, it is very ingenious way to avoid the theory of representative perception.

These 17 moments cannot be understood without reference to the Sautrāntika, Vaibhāṣika controversy.

The Theravādins are able to avoid what is called the theory of representative perception, they made the moment of matter longer than the moment of mind; the moment of matter is 17 times longer than the moment of mind. The external world is directly perceived.